

Organizers work to promote literacy

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February 24, 2004

Eleven agencies throughout San Diego County have launched a \$4 million program to recruit seniors to be mentors for young children.

Two county agencies, the First Five Commission and Aging and Independence Services, will sponsor the program, which was approved in July. Officials kicked off the effort yesterday at a workshop attended by about 200 people at the Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center in Rolando Park.

Organizers hope to harness the energy of seniors and retirees to promote literacy for youngsters and provide a new lifeline for struggling families.

"The whole goal of the intergenerational program is for school readiness to help children to be as best prepared for school as they possibly can and to maximize their potential," said Annie Moore, a program coordinator for the YMCA in Chula Vista.

The \$4 million, which will be divided among the 11 agencies over three years, comes from the First Five Commission, which supports education and health care programs for children before they enter kindergarten.

The commission was created in 1998, after state voters passed Proposition 10, which set aside a portion of tobacco taxes for programs to benefit young children. Statewide the taxes have generated up to \$700 million a year; San Diego County receives \$30 million to \$40 million of that total.

The county has been promoting links between seniors and young people for four years. Officials hope about 200 senior volunteers will take part in the mentoring program.

"Everyone saw the potential to build the capacity of our existing programs with the wisdom and talent of available seniors," said Laura Spiegel, executive director of the First Five Commission.

Other agencies taking part are Alpha of San Diego, Bayside Community Center, the International Rescue Committee, the Neighborhood House Association, and YMCA Childcare Resource Services, all of San Diego.

Regionally, Casa de Amparo of Oceanside, Grossmont College's Child Development and Family Studies Program of El Cajon, Jewish Family Service of Encinitas, South Bay Community Services of Chula Vista, and St. Clare's Home of Escondido will also provide the service.

"It creates a bridge between an older person and a younger person," said Raquel Linnemeyer, 59, of Skyline, who will volunteer with Neighborhood House.

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